General Audience

We cannot conclude our catechesis on God, Creator of the world, without devoting adequate attention to a precise item of divine revelation—the creation of purely spiritual beings which Sacred Scripture calls "angels." This creation appears clearly in the creeds, especially in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, of all things (that is entia or beings) seen and unseen." We know that man enjoys a unique position within the sphere of creation. By his body he belongs to the visible world, while by his spiritual soul which vivifies the body, he is as it were on the boundary between the visible and invisible creation. According to the creed which the Church professes in the light of revelation, other beings which are purely spiritual belong to the invisible creation. Therefore they are not proper to the visible world, even though present and working therein. They constitute a world apart.

Today, as in times past, these spiritual beings are discussed with greater or lesser wisdom. One must recognize that at times there is great confusion. The risk arises of passing off as the Church's faith on the angels what does not pertain to it, or, vice versa, of neglecting some important aspect of the revealed truth. The existence of spiritual beings, which Sacred Scripture usually calls "angels," was denied already in Christ's time by the Sadducees (cf. Acts 23:8). It is denied also by materialists and rationalists of every age. But, as a modern theologian acutely observed, "if one wishes to get rid of the angels, one must radically revise Sacred Scripture itself, and with it the whole history of salvation" (A. Winklhofer, Die Welt der Engel, Ettal 1961, p. 144, note 2; in Mysterium Salutis, II, 2, p. 726). The whole of Tradition is unanimous on this point. The Church's creed basically echoes what Paul wrote to the Colossians: "for in him (Christ) all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominations or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him" (Col 1:16). As the Son-Word, eternal and consubstantial with the Father, Christ is the first-born of all creation (Col 1:15). He is at the center of the universe, as the reason and cornerstone of all creation, as we have already seen in previous catecheses, and as we shall see later when we shall speak more directly of him.

The reference to the "primacy" of Christ helps us to understand that the truth about the existence and activity of the angels (good and bad) is not the central content of the word of God. In revelation God speaks first of all "to men...and lives among them, so that he may invite and take them into fellowship with himself," as we read in the Constitution Dei Verbum of the Second Vatican Council (DV 2). Thus "the deepest truth...both about God and the salvation of man" is the central content of the revelation which "shines out" more fully in the person of Christ (cf. DV 2). The truth about the angels is in a certain sense "collateral," though inseparable from the central revelation, which is the existence, the majesty and the glory of the Creator which shines forth in all creation ("seen" and "unseen") and in God's salvific action in the history of the world. The angels are not creatures of the first order, in the reality of revelation. However, they fully belong to it, so much so that sometimes we see them carrying out fundamental tasks in the name of God himself.

All this that pertains to creation enters, according to revelation, into the mystery of divine Providence. Vatican I, which we have quoted several times, stated it in an exemplary concise manner: "All that God created, he conserves and directs by his Providence 'reaching from end to end mightily and governing all things well' (cf. Wis 8:1), 'All lies bare and exposed to his eyes' (cf. Heb 4:13), even what will take place through the free initiative of creatures (DS 3003). Providence then also embraces the world of pure...
spirits, which are intellectual and free beings still more fully than men. In Sacred Scripture we find important references to them. There is also the revelation of a mysterious, though real, drama concerning these angelic creatures, without anything escaping divine wisdom, which strongly (fortiter) and at the same time gently (suaviter) brings all to fulfillment in the kingdom of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We recognize above all that Providence, as the loving Wisdom of God, was manifested precisely in the creation of purely spiritual beings, so as to express better the likeness of God in them. They are superior to all that is created in the visible world, including man, who is also the indelible image of God. God who is absolutely perfect Spirit, is reflected especially in spiritual beings which by nature, that is, by reason of their spirituality, are nearer to him than material creatures, and which constitute as it were the closest "circle" to the Creator. Sacred Scripture offers abundant explicit evidence of this maximum closeness to God of the angels, who are spoken of figuratively as the "throne" of God, as his "legions," his "heaven." It has inspired the poetry and art of the Christian centuries which present the angels to us as the "court of God."

Teachings from John Paul II [2]


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